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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000531

SIPDIS

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DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: ECONOMY MINISTER WANTS SAAD HARIRI AS THE
NEXT PM, REGARDLESS OF THE ELECTIONS' OUTCOME

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Economy and Trade Minister and MP Mohammed Safadi declared that current majority leader Saad Hariri should be the next PM, regardless of whether Hariri's March 14 coalition or opposition March 8 holds the majority after the June 7 parliamentary elections. Safadi, who is allied with Hariri for the upcoming vote, expressed his concern that some voters in his home district of Tripoli may be enticed to cross off a name or two rather than voting for the full March 14 list. Safadi told us he intended to leave March 14 after the elections because he felt sidelined in the coalition, and suggested that he may join a bloc allied with President Sleiman. According to Safadi, relations between Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun and Sleiman deteriorated drastically after Aoun allegedly demanded Sleiman's tenure be shortened after June 7. End summary.

2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met with Economy and Trade Minister and MP Mohammed Safadi at his office on May 11. Safadi attributed the harsh line of questioning he received regarding WTO accession at a recent Lebanese American Chamber of Commerce event to industrialist Fady Abboud, explaining that Abboud is a member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and was motivated by politics rather than substantive WTO issues.

SAAD HARIRI SHOULD
BE NEXT PM, PERIOD

3. (C) Safadi declared that, in his view, current majority leader Saad Hariri should be the next PM, regardless of whether March 14 or March 8 holds the majority after the June 7 parliamentary elections. Safadi, who was to meet later in the day with Hariri, reasoned that Saad has a "unifying character" needed in the next government and is the "sole leader" of the Sunnis.

4. (C) Safadi (who in the past also has been cited as a possible PM contender) added that this may be Saad's only opportunity to serve as Prime Minister. According to Safadi, Saad wants this position, but believes he needs to be

supported by the "right" people. (Note: In a May 12 conversation with Ambassador, MP Nayla Mouawad was adamant that she would quit the March 14 coalition if Saad Hariri took the position of Prime Minister in a March 8-led government. End note.) Safadi said he would advise Saad not to wait for the outcome of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon before forging a working relationship with Syria.

15. (C) Noting that Lebanon is challenged on three fronts -- Israel, Syria, and Iran -- Safadi said that Lebanon would benefit from reaching some sort of agreement with one of the countries. He suggested that Syria offers the "easiest" track, and that Lebanon cannot rid itself of Hizballah without Syria.

TRIPOLI VOTERS MAY NOT
CHOOSE FULL MARCH 14 LIST

16. (C) Safadi, who is running on March 14's list in Tripoli, complained that there are problems with ensuring voters will select the full list. He relayed that he was hearing of an arrangement between March 14 leader Saad Hariri and current March 14 MP Mosbah Ahdab, who was excluded from the March 14 list (but announced his own independent list on May 9). Saad was tacitly hinting that Sunni voters in Tripoli should cross off a candidate from the list and write in Ahdab's name, complained Safadi. (Comment: We have heard a similar rumor, naming Ahmed Karame as the March 14 candidate to eliminate in favor of Ahdab. End comment.)

17. (C) Safadi estimated that the March 14 list could attract
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35,000 votes. He worried that if people were aware of this number, they may feel encouraged to throw their support behind Ahdab, believing it would not significantly affect the outcome. However, Safadi warned, if too many people thought this way, then the votes for March 14's list would be diluted and the opposition's chances increased, namely, those of former PM and March 8 candidate Omar Karame (who is Ahmad Karame's cousin). Omar Karame reportedly already has 17,000 votes guaranteed because of his ties to Syria.

18. (C) According to Safadi, Hizballah is seizing this opportunity, reaching out to Tripoli heavyweight Najib Mikati's supporters, offering to pay them to cross off a name, and paying even more for two names scratched out. Omar Karame is running a "well-organized and well-funded" campaign managed by Hizballah, Safadi said. He expected to see a significant increase in campaign spending, by all parties, in the final week before the elections. He noted that March 8 controls most of the media and spends the most money.

19. (C) Equally "dangerous," Safadi posited that former Minister Jean Obeid, with close relations to the Syrians, may rely on these ties to get elected because he was not included in March 14's list and may run as an independent. This would draw votes away from March 14's Maronite Christian candidate, Samer Saadeh. He suggested that some March 14 candidates in Tripoli are not throwing their support behind Saadeh. Fearing that several March 14 candidates cannot be counted on to encourage their supporters to vote for the whole list, Safadi stated that he was certain to bring 10,000 voters who will select the full list.

110. (C) He added that he was not concerned about violence breaking out in the Bab al-Tabbaneh/Jbeil Mohsen areas (near Tripoli) prior to elections, but that attention should be refocused on calming tensions there after June 7. He also raised the issues of Sunni/Shia tensions, and of the Palestinian refugees, who are angry at the delay in Nahr al-Bari Palestinian refugee camp reconstruction.

I WILL LEAVE MARCH 14
AFTER THE ELECTIONS...

¶11. (C) While a cameraman was in the room filming, Safadi disclosed that he told Saad he (Safadi) did not have a role to play in March 14, and that he intended to leave the coalition after the elections. If Saad wanted him to stay, he continued, he would need to be given a positive role. Safadi complained that all of the decisions are made by Saad, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, noting that the full March 14 group had not met in some time.

¶12. (C) Safadi also relayed that he proposed to Saad he would join a bloc affiliated with President Sleiman and that he would give Saad his vote for March 14 to maintain a majority, but that he wanted to leave the alliance. (Comment: This is not surprising, as pollsters have been classifying Safadi, as well as former PM Najib Mikati, as independents when calculating how many seats March 14 could win. End comment.)

...AS COULD JUMBLATT

¶13. (C) Noting that Speaker Nabih Berri and Jumblatt have been "making nice," Safadi wondered if Jumblatt would leave March 14 after the elections. He expressed sympathy for Sleiman having to deal with three separate groups claiming to be "the centrist bloc." (Note: Press reported Berri and Saad Hariri met on May 12. Ambassador will meet with Saad May 14 to follow up. End note.)

RELATIONS DETERIORATE
BETWEEN AOUN AND SLEIMAN

¶14. (C) According to Safadi, relations between Free Patriotic
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Movement leader Michel Aoun and President Sleiman are "deteriorating fast" after Aoun reportedly said he would demand to shorten Sleiman's term after June 7. (Note and comment: In local press reports on May 12, Aoun called Sleiman an "accomplice" for not responding to the allegations that Aoun had demanded a shortened tenure. Elie Khourey, advisor to Geagea, shared with A/DCM on May 11 rumors that Aoun is imposing conditions on candidates who wish to run on his lists, including agreement to support Aoun's efforts to topple Sleiman from the presidency. Khourey claimed Fares Boueiz refused this condition, which is why he was excluded from Aoun's list in Keserwan. End note and comment.)

¶15. (C) Safadi warned that independent MP Michel Murr was "overly confident" in believing he would defeat Aoun's list in Metn. He argued that Aoun was continuing to present himself as the "protector of Christians" and painting the Sunnis as the "menace," urging the so-called minorities (Christians, Allawites, and Shia) to bond together in defense. Jumblatt's remarks against the Christians only bolstered Aoun's argument, Safadi said.

¶16. (C) He lamented that Tripoli was an underserved city and a "time bomb." He also complained about March 14 Transport and Public Work Minister Ghazi Aridi's proposal to expand the Beirut port, which Safadi believed would be at the detriment of Tripoli's port. He expected the Council of Ministers would vote on the issue on May 13, and feared that they lacked the information to make a knowledgeable decision.

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